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ABSTRACT

Research on the topic of writing apprehension--general tendency to anxiety that is triggered by the situation of writing--has recently been stimulated by the development of a self-report scale to measure it. Research in the effects of writing apprehension reveals that students who are anxious about writing choose coursework, majors, and occupations to avoid it. More often men, they see themselves negatively as writers. They may have limited writing skills. The style of anxious writers is flat, neutral, self-hiding, and less expressive than that of writers who are not anxious. Another psychogenic problem is writer's cramp. Diagnosis of writing apprehension should first determine whether the student knows how to produce a paper and to manipulate ideas. The writing apprehension scale, analysis of a student's writing style, and in-depth discussion with the student are all viable methods of diagnosing writing apprehension. Methods of treatment include free writing, contracting, teaching positive self-talk (cognitive modification), retraining in the writing process, physical relaxation, and systematic desensitization. Referral to a therapist should be considered if writing apprehension is symptomatic of more general psychological problems. (Author/DF)

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Writing Apprehension

Jo Ann Cope

Anxiety about writing clouds a person's image of himself or herself as a writer and his or her potential pleasure in the act of writing; it cramps his or her academic and career choices; and it taints the quality of his or her writing style. Research into the effects of writing anxiety is only beginning. Little is known about its etiology and less about its frequency and extent, although most teachers of writing probably hold strong opinions on the subject. My objectives here are to describe the characteristics of writing anxiety and its effects upon students' attitudes, behavior and writing style; to provide you with methods for diagnosing it, including a self-report scale; and to make suggestions for alleviating it. My purpose, beyond facilitating student service, is to solicit your help in more deeply understanding this performance anxiety.

Characteristics of Writing Apprehension

The major current research on writing anxiety is being conducted by Dr. John Daly of the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. Daly has coined the term "writing apprehension" to describe a general tendency to anxiety which is triggered by the specific situation of writing (6). He and Miller (7) devised a self-report which measures attitudes, feelings and avoidance behaviors associated with writing which they report to be a "stable one factor measure with

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extremely high reliabilities and low correlations with other measures, both of anxiety and personality (6:176)."

Using this scale, Daly (8) has discovered that fewer writing-anxious students enroll in advanced composition courses and most report an unwillingness to do so. They choose majors which require little writing (9) and view occupations which they believe involves writing as less desirable (10).

Daly (8) reports that writing-anxious people don't feel they've succeeded in writing in the past and anticipate failure in writing courses. There is little or no correlation between writing anxiety and verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (8); but writing-anxious students did score less well on a test of mechanics and grammar (4) and their writing was rated poor in quality than that of less anxious students (3).

More men are anxious about writing that women (8). Teachers expect less, both in writing and in other school performance, of these students, although they expect more of anxious men than women (5).

Daly (5) quizzed one group of teachers who hypothesized that overgrading on mechanics, disagreement with students' ideas, poor assignments, embarrassment of students and the association of writing with punishment could cause writing apprehension. Students' poor skills and low self-esteem, as well as poor models, were also possible causative handicaps (5).

Daly (6) has found that fearful students chose neutral and flat words, while those free from nervousness chose more vigorous and expressive vocabulary. Writing-anxious students wrote shorter essays and qualified their writing less (3).

Research other than Daly's supports and broadens his findings. As early as 1930 the German psychoanalyst Paul Federn (12) deduced that two kinds of poor style are characteristic of "frightened" writing. If the writer has not resolved conflicts and questions concerning his subject matter, his writing may be characterized by impersonal wording, syntax which delays and/or obfuscates the main idea, overgeneralization and overuse of absolutes and expletives. A second type of "neurotic" style, a "permanent and generalized...'communication neurosis' (12:686)" or writing phobia, Federn hypothesizes may be caused by a fear of revealing oneself through one's writing which, in extremis, amounts to "stage fright" or "writer's bloc.." Federn is careful to discriminate a "neurotic" writer from one whose errors are caused by simple indifference to correct language. The neurotic style is impersonal, self-hiding; the opposite is true of the self-expressive but careless writer.

Another psychogenic problem with writing which, though rare, you may encounter, is writer's cramp, a psychosomatic impairment of the writing arm and hand characterized by any of a variety of symptoms such as spasms, incoordination, fatigue, weakness, stiffness, tremor, jerking or pain when trying to write (1:841). Attempts to compensate for the pain cause sufferers to assume bizarre writing postures, faulty habits which further inhibit their writing and cause their skills to deteriorate (1:855). People with writer's cramp, while without evidence of neurotic symptoms, are described as "particularly tense, striving, sensitive, conscientious, precise, emotionally overcontrolled people with a need to help others and a tendency to become overdependent in their interpersonal relationships

and work (1:855)." Orthopaedic surgeons have responded to writer's cramp with surgery as well as manipulative and chemical therapy; neurologists have used drugs; psychoanalytic therapy has not proved helpful; psychologists, after trying general physical exercises and electroshock, have had the greatest success with specific retraining and relaxation.

Diagnosis of Writing Apprehension

Anxiety, especially among inexperienced writers, is sometimes caused by ignorance of the process of writing. Ascertain, first, whether your student has a systematic method for producing a paper, and if he or she doesn't, teach him or her the stages of the writing process: how to choose a topic and narrow it, collect and organize information, produce and revise a rough draft, and so on.

A writer who is ambivalent about the ideas he or she is trying to present, who has not developed or organized them, who has not reached clarity about what he or she believes, may block. Dialog, as either the student's or the devil's advocate, to help him or her sort out his or her ideas. Ask him or her to write a one-paragraph statement of thesis.

Writing apprehension can inhibit even writers who are knowledgeable of the writing process and experienced with manipulating ideas. Daly and Miller's scale (7) is an important contribution to the diagnosis of apprehension. (You should develop local norms, although you can use the statistics reported in several articles by these authors.) You may also observe some of the stylistic manifestations described above and question your student about the extent to which anxiety is interfering with his writing.

Diagnose more precisely the point in the process affected by anxiety.

Your student may be procrastinating. He or she may research assiduously but be unable to organize the diversity of material. Given ideas and organization, he or she may freeze before the blank page. Through misguided perfectionism he or she may start but never finish papers. The student may give up at the editing stage, unwilling or unable to proof his or her own writing. The whole process may be so difficult that it takes an inordinate amount of time and painful effort.

Treatment of Writing Apprehension

For students who are blocking, free writing (18) is a valuable tool. Have him or her write about whatever comes into his or her head without stopping for a given period of time, beginning with one minute, progressing to five and then fifteen minutes. The student should never stop writing and you should not read what he or she writes unless it is volunteered.

Passman (16) reports success through contracting with a young woman who had no apparent clinical problems except a history of procrastination on papers which caused feelings of panic, failure and defeatism which blocked her writing. She agreed to write one paragraph per day in one sitting and then reward herself by playing music or visiting someone. Although the client's panic at first prevented her respecting even such a simple contract, she was eventually able to write two paragraphs per day in two sittings, complete her assignments and free herself of symptoms.

A student through traumatic history or ignorance of procedures may voice a negative self-image or unrealistic expectations. Help him or her to become aware of his or her negative self-talk (13,14,17); then teach how to stop it and direct him or herself to activities which will help him or her

complete the paper.

If the level of anxiety is high, even though the student knows how to write a paper, you may need to retrain him or her in such matters as time management, organization of ideas, and so on. Breaking down the task into concrete and discrete steps can be valuable for someone who is very anxious.

Such a student may need to learn how to relax physically. You might have him or her listen to a tape of relaxation instructions to calm down prior to writing. A successful treatment of writer's cramp (1:844-845) consistented of relaxation training with special emphasis on the arm and hand and retraining in writing, beginning with soft-nosed felt pens which required a soft touch on the paper and progressing to normal tools.

Systematic desensitization (2,13) is a viable response in extreme cases. Here you would want to explore carefully with the student the situations, ideas, fears and expectations which trigger his or her anxiety and set up a hierarchy based on them.

According to the situation, you may try some variation of several of these methods. However, anxiety about writing may be symptomatic of deeper and more general psychological problems. In the process of diagnosis, determine whether other areas of the person's life--relationships with others, self-concept, other aspects of performance at work or school--are relatively happy and functioning effectively. If not, refer to a therapist instead of, or contingent with, work on writing. To address the specific concern without exploring deeper problems is probably at best patchwork.

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